Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers | Faculty and Researchers' Publications

2017-07-15

ImplicationsbehindErdoganssecondwarofindependence

Gingeras, Ryan

Gingeras, Ryan. "Implications behind Erdogans Second War of Independence.." New Age. Available online: http://www. newagebd. net/article/19767/implications-behind-erdogans-second-war-of-independence (2017). http://hdl.handle.net/10945/66234

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. As such, it is in the public domain, and under the provisions of Title 17, United States Code, Section 105, it may not be copyrighted.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun

http://www.nps.edu/library

Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

NEWAGE

Implications behind Erdogan's 'second war of independence'

by Ryan Gingeras | Updated at 12:50am on July 15, 2017

A patriotic painting depicting the Turkish army's entry into Izmir after the defeat of the Greeks during the Turkish war of independence. The five men in the centre are, from left to right, Kazim Karabekir Pasha, Ismet Pasha (later Ismet Inonu), Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk), Fahrettin Pasha (later Omer Fahrettin Turkkan), and Fevzi Pasha (later Fevzi Cakmak). — Wikipedia

WHILE Turkish politics often tend toward the dramatic, the language currently being used by both government and opposition figures is remarkably volatile.

During the AKP campaign in April, while promoting the referendum that will now reorganise the Turkish government around an executive presidency, the country's most prominent political figures and commentators inveighed against their political opponents, at home and abroad. In response to prohibitions against Turkish campaign rallies in Europe, president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's loyalists took to calling their German and Dutch critics Nazis and fascists. Leading members of the government regularly labelled referendum opponents inside Turkey as traitors.

In the midst of these superlatives and insults, it is easy to miss or dismiss messages that have a deeper significance for domestic Turkish audiences. One of the most resounding and consistent of these tropes draws on particular traumatic and formative events from the nation's history.

Time and again, both government officials and their allies have suggested that Turkey is experiencing a 'second war of independence.' While one may consider this yet another manifestation of casual hyperbole, there is nothing trivial about the repeated use of this phrase. Regardless of their background or convictions, for most Turks, references to Turkey's original 'war of independence' signifies a common set of principles and fears many citizens share. By invoking Turkey's original struggle for freedom, the AKP government and its allies are playing upon Turkish society's most fundamental impulses and apprehensions. The result of this rhetorical turn may have lasting, and potentially very violent, consequences for Turkey's future.

Turkey's war for independence

TURKEY'S war of independence lasted from the spring of 1919 to the fall of 1922. Through these three years of intense fighting, the Turkish republic came into being, and the Ottoman empire was finally

dismantled and repudiated. It was during this era that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk established himself as the country's founding father. There is little doubt that his hard earned victory over the Greeks and their allies in 1922 provided the moral basis for Ataturk's subsequent cultural and political revolution. Following the horrors and humiliating defeat of the First World War, it was a pivotal and uniquely redeeming moment in the country's history.

To understand how most Turks interpret this history (and apply its lessons to the present), a basic appreciation for how it is taught and portrayed in Turkey is key. During elementary school, all Turkish school children are required to take lessons about what is called 'Revolutionary History and Ataturkism.' As an element of Turkey's national curriculum, this course represents the most rigorous exposure to history a Turkish citizen receives at school.

The course, which is reiterated in high school (and possibly university as well), is almost entirely drawn from Ataturk's own personal retelling of the origins and implications of the Turkish War of Independence. A disproportionate amount of time is spent on the actions and supposed motivations of the many characters who partook in the independence struggle. While underscoring Ataturk's contribution to the war effort (as both a general and a statesman), the course goes to great lengths in emphasising the malevolence and duplicity of the war's core losers.

Unlike advanced courses or preparatory exams in American history, a standard set of textbooks are used for the class in all schools across the country. Judging from past course materials, the course's core narrative and conclusions have hardly deviated from their original iterations in the early twentieth century.

There are many aspects of the Turkish war of independence that make its retelling convoluted and challenging for any course, let alone one with a clear ideological purpose. The period between 1919 and 1922 was, for example, as much a civil war as it was a fight between occupiers and resisters. At no point during the conflict did the creation of the Turkish Republic appear fated or predestined. Anatolia's inhabitants were deeply divided over the future of their government, as well as who or what would serve as a genuine source of leadership and sovereignty.

As late as 1922, large segments of the population opposed Mustafa Kemal's forces and were loyal to the Ottoman sultan. Though he did not officially repudiate the sultan or the notion of empire until after the war was over, Ataturk pointedly attacked supporters of the sultan's government as traitors and foreign sympathisers. Even more frequently, treason during the War of Independence was defined along sectarian and ethnic lines. Ataturk's camp considered all Muslims natural supporters of their cause despite profound internal differences over matters of politics and society. By contrast, Ataturk and his supporters depicted Christians, be they Armenians or Greeks, as prone to foreign collaboration. Others among Ataturk's inner circle privately cast suspicions upon Muslim minorities, be they Kurds, Alevis, or

Circassians, as incapable of being fully trustworthy. Violence and massacres committed by Greek troops, as well as native Christian and Muslim auxiliaries and rebels, were considered by many as definitive proof for these misgivings.

In retelling the War of Independence, the Turkish textbooks by no means disregard these internal rifts and incongruities. Instead, Ataturk's delayed rejection of the Ottoman sultan and the empire is depicted as a prudent and politically astute ruse in the service of preparing the population for secular republican rule. The fact that large numbers of Muslim and Christian defied Mustafa Kemal's leadership is similarly explained and dismissed. Internal uprisings and popular opposition to Kemalism are represented, as treason born either out of foreign meddling, anti-Turkish prejudice, or reactionary politics.

Today's 'war of Independence'

WHATEVER aversion Turkey's current president may have toward Kemalism and self-declared Kemalists, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has embraced, almost in its entirety, the traditional narrative and conclusions of the War of Independence, as expressed in the Turkish curriculum. He references the war on a consistent basis, often within the context of far flung analogies and examples drawn from Turkish history.

In his estimation, Turkey has long been involved in a life or death struggle against enemies lurking at home and abroad. Both then and now, rival foreign powers and native traitors threaten the country's very existence. While often coy in naming the states standing against Turkey, Erdogan has openly named the groups he deems traitorous and threatening: Gulenists, Kurdish militants, supporters of the Gezi Park demonstrations.

While calling the attempted coup of July 2016 'the most serious hardship since the war of independence', Erdogan has also repeatedly assured his audience that Turks are destined to emerge from today's crises victorious. For Erdogan, Turkey's success in the War of Independence stands as 'proof of what the Turkish nation can do in the worst of times.'

Erdogan's surrogates in the press are even more explicit and threatening when drawing parallels between contemporary events and the War of Independence. Ibrahim Karagul, editor of the pro-AKP daily Yeni Safak, regularly implores his readers to stand ready to defend the nation from an inconceivably grand alliance of adversaries (a list that has at various times included the United States, the European Union, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, Gulenists, the PKK and YPG). As it was almost a century ago, he claims, the true goal of this conspiracy is to partition Turkey and bring it to ruin.

Notably, Karagul has gone out of his way to expand upon Erdogan's criticism of the territorial concessions Ataturk made in signing the Treaty of Lausanne, the 1923 international agreement that ended the war of independence. Erdogan, he declared, will draw a 'new regional map' for the Middle East, one in defiance of 'western crusaders' and their local allies.

How the Turkish public has received these musing about the past and present is not entirely clear. The Republic Peoples' Party, which was founded by Ataturk and is most commonly know by its Turkish acronym, CHP, still prides itself as the embodiment of Ataturk's revolution. At CHP organised rallies, protesters are often heard chanting, 'we are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal.' For many secular Turks, the legacy of the War of Independence belongs to those who most closely follow Ataturk's dictates and example.

For supporters of the AKP, there are signs they are appropriating the physical struggle for Turkey's independence in a much more literal sense. In the last year, it has become commonplace for AKP supporters to compare those who resisted the coup on the night of July 15th to the volunteers who first joined Mustafa Kemal in the fight against the Greeks in 1919. 'The nation's epic resistance on July 15th', as one governor recently put it, 'like 19 May 1919, brought fear to oppressors, hope to the oppressed and was an example to other nations.' Several reports since last summer have spoken of citizens acquiring arms and forming volunteer militias. There have been images and Internet postings in the mold of Mehmet Aybek, the local AKP activist who posed with a machine gun while declaring his willingness to kill upon Erdogan's order.

To some extent, this rhetoric reflects long-standing national insecurities within Turkish politics. Resentment towards the United States and western European states, especially in light of the wars in Iraq and Syria, runs deep within many branches of Turkish society. Erdogan has been particularly successful at harnessing this bitterness, often projecting it back as a phenomenon generations in the making. In repeatedly conjuring up the notion of a new War of Independence, Erdogan has subtlety cast himself as the nation's savior akin to Mustafa Kemal- going so far, last year, as to name himself as both president and commander-in-chief, much like Ataturk did in 1922.

A dangerous rhetorical turn

THESE messages should give Turks pause, and remind them of past attempts to resurrect history for contemporary political purposes. Violent romantic fantasies about the past have regularly served to create and accelerate communal conflict. Slobadan Milosevic's repeated allusions to Serbia's supposed history of oppression by Ottoman Muslims provided justification for the horrors inflicted upon civilians in Bosnia and Kosova. Similarly, Russian nationalists have long indulged in distorted memories of violence and conquest to justify contemporary events in the Caucasus and the Ukraine.

Given what is at stake, Erdogan's insistence that Turkey's war of independence is repeating itself may have truly frightful consequences. Claiming that today's political dissidents are no different from the Greeks and rebellious Muslims of a century ago implies that such opponents need to be fought on the same terms. To make this clear, the government need not spell out its argument in precise terms.

Thanks to the uniform Turkish education system, every Turkish citizen understands exactly what they mean.

Muftah.org, July 11. Ryan Gingeras is an associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He is the author of multiple books on the history of Turkey and the Ottoman empire. His most recent book is Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Empire (Oxford, 2016).